

**DO WE ALL ACKNOWLEDGE THE EXISTENCE OF A MARKET IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION?  
A VIEWPOINT FROM THE ACADEMIC COOPERATION AGENCIES**

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The "Academic Cooperation Association" (ACA) is an independent European organisation dedicated to the support, improvement, management and analysis of academic cooperation within Europe and between Europe and other parts of the world. It was created in July 1993 with the legal status of a non-profit-making international association according to Belgian law and a secretariat in Brussels. The founding President was Professor Eduardo Marçal Grilo, then Director of Cooperation at the Gulbenkian Foundation. The members of ACA are major agencies located in European countries responsible for the promotion of international academic cooperation. There is no Portuguese member of ACA at present.

The current article is based on the proceedings of a conference organised by ACA with the generous support of the Stifterverband für Deutsche Wissenschaft, entitled "The future of international academic cooperation: challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> century". The meeting, in October 1996, brought together the chief executives of academic cooperation agencies from around the world for discussions at the Botanic Gardens in Meise, just outside Brussels. The full proceedings entitled "Making the case for international cooperation in higher education: the Meise consensus" are available on request from the ACA Secretariat.

One of the key areas of discussion at the Meise conference was on the emergence of a market philosophy in many parts of the world in relation to foreign students. As Christian Bode of the DAAD(1) outlined in his presentation on "What's New in International Educational Cooperation?", the number of international students around the world is growing fast and was at the time (October 1996) expected almost to double in the near future. Given the global nature of supply and demand, a debate on the existence of a higher education market, specifically in relation to the recruitment of foreign students, emerged early in the meeting. Since these discussions, the instability of financial markets in some of the

countries traditionally "exporting" students, as well as new developments in the areas of fees, quality assurance and franchising, have ensured that the "market" issue remains topical.

The role of the academic cooperation agencies in relation to the international marketplace naturally varies according to the national approach and the corresponding differences in methods of university cooperation, particularly in relation to the treatment of national and international students. Over the course of the conference a spectrum emerged, ranging from the Australian model, where the IDP(2) receives \$1000 Australian dollars for each foreign student who comes to Australia, to countries such as Greece where no fees for students are charged and the acceptance of foreign students is viewed in predominantly "philanthropic" terms. A feature of the Meise conference was the movement along the spectrum and the indications of shifting national attitudes: Norway, for instance, plans the introduction of fees once the international competitiveness in its higher education system has been established. The debate is also very active in Germany with strongly held views on the principle of charging students – national or foreign - for higher education. In Ireland the high level of demand from Irish students on the internal market leaves almost no possibilities for foreign students to enrol in Irish institutions but national pressure to commercialise has led to the establishment of the Irish International Education Board.

With the acknowledgement of the emergence of an international higher education market, albeit one in which not all countries participate, issues of international competitiveness also have to be recognised. The general feeling amongst the Meise participants was that competition could raise the quality of education if the emphasis is put on excellence and quality of delivery of services rather than quantity of students or revenue. The risks of a short term approach – in other words considering the foreign student merely as a market commodity – include the adoption of questionable admission practices and the offering of non-quality assured courses. Students themselves, especially those financing their own studies, are considered to be good at quality control; the effect of negative experiences of study abroad communicated by word of mouth should not be underestimated. According to some delegates, however, the danger of a total reliance on student choice is that students are inevitably influenced by short-term market trends. On a more positive note, it was reported that the first generation of Singaporeans who graduated from Australian universities are now sending their own children to study in Australia.

It should be mentioned that not all the participants at the Meise conference acknowledged the existence of an autonomous market in international students, because of its semi-public, semi-private status. Franz Eberhard of the International Association of Universities in Paris considered the market logic to be flawed by its short-termism; he stated that accurate studies on student motivation and the assessment of the reasons behind the need for international higher education are necessary before the "defining" of a market is possible. Jim Whittell of the British Council reported that according to a HEIST/British Council investigation on European student mobility to the UK, students would "buy" the (international) education that would guarantee integration on the job market. Denis Blight of IDP Australia stressed that there are two separate issues to consider: on the one hand student advising for recruitment; and on the other increasing the number of support programmes and hence the number of financed students.

If a market to attract and recruit international students does exist, it is clear that not all countries participate. Some of the Meise delegates took the view that countries which do not charge fees to these students are effectively subsidising - and eventually distorting - the market, since their capacity for hosting non-paying students is inevitably limited, as was reported in Sweden.

The new fee-basis of education in many countries is opening up the sector to competition. The need to control quality and cost-effectiveness was therefore assessed by the conference delegates. For those countries considering the introduction of fees there is a need to know the cost of activities in order at least to cover them; a reliable cost/benefit analysis as well as a study of the relationship between research quality and fee levels can ensure that institutions do not subsidise unwittingly, though they may of course make a positive choice to do so. But what is the position of those institutions unlikely to be able to compete in the recruitment of international students, including many African institutions, for example? And is it possible to reduce to an economic argument the study of seemingly non-competitive languages and /or cultures?

A general feeling amongst the Meise delegates was that there was a risk that the internationalisation of higher education could be equated to "creeping Anglicisation" (the spread of the English language), with the widespread introduction of English-medium courses for international students. Language seems to be a major element in the trend of countries joining the developing market in international education, membership of which is generally characterised by countries which provide some education in English, partly or solely to attract international students.

In conclusion, the overall objective being the development of higher education, it was agreed by most delegates that the growth of a higher education international market is in any case unavoidable and that it can bring positive results. Governments, academic cooperation agencies and universities in all countries need to define their role and position in the evolving landscape to ensure the quality of their respective higher education provision both at national and international levels.

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(1)Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, German Academic Exchange Service, the German member of ACA

(2)IDP Education Australia, Australian associate member of ACA